

Frequently Asked Questions

Elections in the state of Washington

Why are results “unofficial” election night and not final?

After election day, election officials must process and tabulate absentee ballots that were received on or after election day, process special ballots, and canvass the election. These tasks are completed up to the time of certification of the election. Primary Election results are certified ten days after the election; General Election results are certified fifteen days after the election. ([See RCW 29.62.020](#))

For the November 6, 2001 General election, County Canvassing Boards will certify their results on November 21st. Secretary of State Sam Reed must certify results of the statewide ballot measures by December 6th. (By law, the Secretary of State certifies all statewide ballot measures and contests that cross county lines.)

Following election day, how often will ballots be counted and reported?

At least every third day after an election, (excluding Sundays and holidays), County Auditors are required to tabulate absentee ballots if they are in possession of more than 25 ballots. ([See RCW 29.62.020](#))

Why are ballots received and tabulated after election day?

To be valid, absentee ballots must be postmarked by the day of the election. Ballots mailed on election day arrive at county election offices in the days following the election and then must be processed and tabulated prior to certification. ([See RCW 29.36.290](#), [WAC 434-240-240](#))

What are “special” ballots?

Special ballots are issued to voters who appear at the polls and their name does not appear in the poll book, they were issued an absentee ballot, or there is a question regarding the issues or candidates that a voter is eligible to vote on. These ballots are separated from the rest of the ballots and not tabulated on election night. During the certification period following the election, officials research each special ballot to determine the eligibility of the voter.

Special ballots are presented to the canvassing board at certification for determination on whether or not the ballot is counted based on the voter's eligibility. ([See RCW 29.01.006](#))

What triggers a recount?

A **mandatory** recount is triggered if the difference between the top two candidates is fewer than 2000 votes and less than one-half of one percent. If the difference is fewer than 150 votes and less than one quarter of one percent, the ballots must be recounted manually. ([See RCW 29.64.015](#))

When a mandatory recount is not required, a candidate, political party, or any group of five registered voters may **request** a recount.

The request must be filed within three business days after the election results are certified. ([See RCW 29.64.010](#))

To request a machine recount, a deposit equal to fifteen cents for each ballot cast in the jurisdiction or portion of the jurisdiction for which the recount is requested must be filed along with the request for a recount.

To request a manual recount, a deposit equal to twenty-five cents for each ballot must be filed along with the request for a recount. ([See RCW 29.64.020](#))

What is canvassing the election?

Canvassing an election is examining the ballots, and vote totals in order to determine the official returns for the election. ([See RCW 29.01.008](#))

The county canvassing board consists of the county auditor, prosecutor, and chair of the county legislative authority or their designee. ([See RCW 29.62.015](#))

RCW 29.62.020

County canvassing board -- Absentee ballots -- Unofficial returns.

(1) At least every third day after a special election, primary, or general election and before certification of the election results, except Sundays and legal holidays, the county auditor shall convene the county canvassing board or their designees to process absentee ballots and canvass the votes cast at that special election, primary, or general election, if the county auditor is in possession of more than twenty-five ballots that have yet to be canvassed. The county auditor may use his or her discretion in determining when to convene the canvassing board or their designees during the final four days before the certification of election results in order to protect the secrecy of any ballot.

Each absentee ballot previously not canvassed that was received by the county auditor two days or more before the convening of the canvassing board or their designees and that either was received by the county auditor before the closing of the polls on the day of the special election, primary, or general election for which it was issued, or that bears a date of mailing on or before the special election, primary, or general election for which it was issued, must be processed at that time. The tabulation of votes that results from that day's canvass must be made available to the general public immediately upon completion of the canvass.

(2) On the tenth day after a special election or a primary and on the fifteenth day after a general election, the canvassing board shall complete the canvass and certify the results. Each absentee ballot that was returned before the closing of the polls on the date of the primary or election for which it was issued, and each absentee ballot with a date of mailing on or before the date of the primary or election for which it was issued and received on or before the date on which the primary or election is certified, shall be included in the canvass report.

(3) At the request of any caucus of the state legislature, the county auditor shall transmit copies of all unofficial returns of state and legislative primaries or elections prepared by or for the county canvassing board to either the secretary of the senate or the chief clerk of the house.

[1999 c 259 § 4; 1995 c 139 § 2; 1987 c 54 § 2; 1965 c 9 § [29.62.020](#). Prior: 1957 c 195 § 15; prior: 1919 c 163 § 21, part; Code 1881 § 3095, part; 1868 p 20 § 1, part; 1865 p 39 § 6, part; RRS § 5340, part.]

NOTES:

Absentee ballots, canvassing: RCW [29.36.310](#).

WAC 434-240-240 Verification of the signature and postmark on absentee ballots. An absentee ballot shall be counted only if:

- (1) It is returned in the return envelope;
- (2) The affidavit is signed by the registered voter to whom it was issued;
- (3) The signature has been verified by the county canvassing board;
- (4) It is postmarked not later than the day of the election or deposited not later than 8:00 p.m. on election day; and
- (5) The absentee ballot is received by the certification of the election.

The canvassing board must compare the signature on the return envelope, or on a copy of the return envelope, with the signature as it appears on the voter's voter registration card. The canvassing board may designate in writing representatives to perform this function. All personnel assigned to the duty of signature verification shall subscribe to an oath administered by the county auditor regarding the discharge of his or her duties. Personnel shall be instructed in the signature verification process prior to actually canvassing any signatures. Local law enforcement officials may instruct those employees in techniques used to identify forgeries. For service voters, overseas voters, and out-of-state voters the date of mailing shall be the date indicated by the voter on the return envelope, and any envelope which shows a date subsequent to the date of the primary or general election shall be referred to the county canvassing board for disposition. For all other absentee ballots, the date of mailing shall be the postmark, if present and legible. If the postmark is not present or legible, the date of mailing shall be considered the date indicated by the voter on the return envelope. All absentee ballots showing a postmark subsequent to the date of the primary or election, or a date indicated by the voter subsequent to the date of the primary or election if the postmark is missing or illegible, shall be referred to the county canvassing board for their disposition. The signature verification process shall be open to the public, subject to reasonable procedures adopted and promulgated by the canvassing board to ensure that order is maintained and to safeguard the integrity of the process.

[Statutory Authority: RCW [29.04.080](#), [29.04.210](#), [29.36.150](#) and [29.79.200](#). 97-21-045, recodified as § 434-240-240, filed 10/13/97, effective 11/13/97. Statutory Authority: RCW [29.36.150](#). 88-03-019 (Order 88-1), § 434-40-240, filed 1/12/88.]

RCW 29.36.290

Envelopes and instructions.

The county auditor shall send each absentee voter a ballot, a security envelope in which to seal the ballot after voting, a larger envelope in which to return the security envelope, and instructions on how to mark the ballot and how to return it to the county auditor. The larger return envelope must contain a declaration by the absentee voter reciting his or her qualifications and stating that he or she has not voted in any other jurisdiction at this election, together with a summary of the penalties for any violation of any of the provisions of this chapter. The return envelope must provide space for the voter to indicate the date on which the ballot was voted and for the voter to sign the oath. A summary of the applicable penalty provisions of this chapter must be printed on the return envelope immediately adjacent to the space for the voter's signature. The signature of the voter on the return envelope must affirm and attest to the statements regarding the qualifications of that voter and to the validity of the ballot. For out-of-state voters, overseas voters, and service voters, the signed declaration on the return envelope constitutes the equivalent of a voter registration for the election or primary for which the ballot has been issued. The voter must be instructed to either return the ballot to the county auditor by whom it was issued or attach sufficient first class postage, if applicable, and mail the ballot to the appropriate county auditor no later than the day of the election or primary for which the ballot was issued.

If the county auditor chooses to forward absentee ballots, he or she must include with the ballot a clear explanation of the qualifications necessary to vote in that election and must also advise a voter with questions about his or her eligibility to contact the county auditor. This explanation may be provided on the ballot envelope, on an enclosed insert, or printed directly on the ballot itself. If the information is not included, the envelope must clearly indicate that the ballot is not to be forwarded and that return postage is guaranteed.

[2001 c 241 § 8; 1987 c 346 § 12. Formerly RCW [29.36.045](#).]

NOTES:

Legislative intent -- Effective date -- 1987 c 346: See notes

following RCW [29.36.210](#).

RCW 29.01.006

Ballot and related terms.

As used in this title:

(1) "Ballot" means, as the context implies, either:

(a) The issues and offices to be voted upon in a jurisdiction or portion of a jurisdiction at a particular primary, general election, or special election;

(b) A facsimile of the contents of a particular ballot whether printed on a paper ballot or ballot card or as part of a voting machine or voting device;

(c) A physical or electronic record of the choices of an individual voter in a particular primary, general election, or special election; or

(d) The physical document on which the voter's choices are to be recorded;

(2) "Paper ballot" means a piece of paper on which the ballot for a particular election or primary has been printed, on which a voter may record his or her choices for any candidate or for or against any measure, and that is to be tabulated manually;

(3) "Ballot card" means any type of card or piece of paper of any size on which a voter may record his or her choices for any candidate and for or against any measure and that is to be tabulated on a vote tallying system;

(4) "Sample ballot" means a printed facsimile of all the issues and offices on the ballot in a jurisdiction and is intended to give voters notice of the issues, offices, and candidates that are to be voted on at a particular primary, general election, or special election;

(5) "Special ballot" means a ballot issued to a voter at the polling place on election day by the precinct election board, for one of the following reasons:

(a) The voter's name does not appear in the poll book;

(b) There is an indication in the poll book that the voter has requested an absentee ballot, but the voter wishes to vote at the polling place;

(c) There is a question on the part of the voter concerning the issues or candidates on which the voter is qualified to vote.

[1994 c 57 § 2; 1990 c 59 § 2; 1977 ex.s. c 361 § 1.]

NOTES:

Severability -- Effective date -- 1994 c 57: See notes following RCW [10.64.021](#).

Intent -- 1990 c 59: "By this act the legislature intends to unify and simplify the laws and procedures governing filing for elective office, ballot layout, ballot format, voting equipment, and canvassing." [1990 c 59 § 1.]

Effective date -- 1990 c 59: "Sections 1 through 6, 8 through 96, and 98 through 112 of this act shall take effect July 1, 1992." [1990 c 59 § 113.]

Effective date -- 1977 ex.s. c 361: "This 1977 amendatory act shall take effect January 1, 1978." [1977 ex.s. c 361 § 113.]

Severability -- 1977 ex.s. c 361: "If any provision of this 1977 amendatory act, or its application to any person or circumstance is held invalid, the remainder of the act, or the application of the provision to other persons or circumstances is not affected." [1977 ex.s. c 361 § 112.]

RCW 29.64.015

Mandatory recount.

(1) If the official canvass of all of the returns for any office at any primary or election reveals that the difference in the number of votes cast for a candidate apparently nominated or elected to any office and the number of votes cast for the closest apparently defeated opponent is less than two thousand votes and also less than one-half of one percent of the total number of votes cast for both candidates, the county canvassing board shall conduct a recount of all votes cast on that position.

(a) Whenever such a difference occurs in the number of votes cast for candidates for a position the declaration of candidacy for which was filed with the secretary of state, the secretary of state shall, within three business days of the day that the returns of the primary or election are first certified by the canvassing boards of those counties, direct those boards to recount all votes cast on the position.

(b) If the difference in the number of votes cast for the apparent winner and the closest apparently defeated opponent is less than one hundred fifty votes and also less than one-fourth of one percent of the total number of votes cast for both candidates, the votes shall be recounted manually or as provided in subsection (3) of this section.

(2) A mandatory recount shall be conducted in the manner provided by RCW [29.64.020](#), [29.64.030](#), and [29.64.040](#). No cost of a mandatory recount may be charged to any candidate.

(3) The apparent winner and closest apparently defeated opponent for an office for which a manual recount is required under subsection (1)(b) of this section may select an alternative method of conducting the recount. To select such an alternative, the two candidates shall agree to the alternative in a signed, written statement filed with the election official for the office. The recount shall be conducted using the alternative method if: It is suited to the balloting system that was used for casting the votes for the office; it involves the use of a vote tallying system that is approved for use in this state by the secretary of state; and the vote tallying system is readily available in each county required to conduct the recount. If more than one

balloting system was used in casting votes for the office, an alternative to a manual recount may be selected for each system.

[2001 c 225 § 4; 1993 c 377 § 1; 1991 c 90 § 2; 1987 c 54 § 4; 1965 c 9 § [29.64.015](#). Prior: 1963 ex.s. c 25 § 2.]

NOTES:

Finding, purpose -- 1991 c 90: "The legislature finds that it is in the public interest to determine the winner of close contests for elective offices as expeditiously and as accurately as possible. It is the purpose of this act to provide procedures which promote the prompt and accurate recounting of votes for elective offices and which provide closure to the recount process." [1991 c 90 § 1.]

RCW 29.64.010

Application for recount -- Requirements -- Application of chapter.

An officer of a political party or any person for whom votes were cast in a primary who was not declared nominated may file a written application for a recount of the votes or a portion of the votes cast at that primary for all persons for whom votes were cast for nomination to that office.

An officer of a political party or any person for whom votes were cast at any election may file a written application for a recount of the votes or a portion of the votes cast at that election for all candidates for election to that office.

Any group of five or more registered voters may file a written application for a recount of the votes or a portion of the votes cast upon any question or issue. They shall designate one of the members of the group as chairman and shall indicate the voting residence of each member of the group.

An application for a recount of the votes cast for an office or on a ballot measure must be filed with the officer with whom filings are made for the jurisdiction.

An application for a recount must specify whether the recount will be done manually or by the vote tally system. A recount done by the vote tally system must use programming that recounts and reports only the office or ballot measure in question. The county shall also provide for a test of the logic and accuracy of that program.

An application for a recount shall be filed within three business days after the county canvassing board or secretary of state has declared the official results of the primary or election for the office or issue for which the recount is requested.

This chapter applies to the recounting of votes cast by paper ballots and to the recounting of votes recorded on ballots counted by a vote tally system.

[2001 c 225 § 3; 1987 c 54 § 3; 1977 ex.s. c 361 § 98; 1965 c 9 § [29.64.010](#). Prior: 1963 ex.s. c 25 § 1; 1961 c 50 § 1; 1955 c 215 § 1.]

NOTES:

Effective date -- Severability -- 1977 ex.s. c 361: See notes following RCW [29.01.006](#).

RCW 29.64.020

Deposit of fees -- Notice -- Public proceeding.

An application for a recount shall state the office for which a recount is requested and whether the request is for all or only a portion of the votes cast in that jurisdiction of that office. The person filing an application for a manual recount shall, at the same time, deposit with the county canvassing board or secretary of state, in cash or by certified check, a sum equal to twenty-five cents for each ballot cast in the jurisdiction or portion of the jurisdiction for which the recount is requested as security for the payment of any costs of conducting the recount. If the application is for a machine recount, the deposit must be equal to fifteen cents for each ballot. These charges shall be determined by the county canvassing board or boards under RCW [29.64.060](#).

The county canvassing board shall determine a time and a place or places at which the recount will be conducted. This time shall be less than three business days after the day upon which: The application was filed with the board; the request for a recount or directive ordering a recount was received by the board from the secretary of state; or the returns are certified which indicate that a recount is required under RCW [29.64.015](#) for an issue or office voted upon only within the county. Not less than two days before the date of the recount, the county auditor shall mail a notice of the time and place of the recount to the applicant or affected parties and, if the recount involves an office, to any person for whom votes were cast for that office. The county auditor shall also notify the affected parties by either telephone, fax, e-mail, or other electronic means at the time of mailing. At least three attempts must be made over a two-day period to notify the affected parties or until the affected parties have received the notification. Each attempt to notify affected parties must request a return response indicating that the notice has been received. Each person entitled to receive notice of the recount may attend, witness the recount, and be accompanied by counsel.

Proceedings of the canvassing board are public under chapter [42.30](#) RCW. Subject to reasonable and equitable guidelines adopted by the canvassing board, all interested persons may attend and witness a recount.

[2001 c 225 § 5; 1991 c 81 § 36; 1987 c 54 § 5; 1977 ex.s. c 361 § 99; 1965 c 9 §

[29.64.020](#). Prior: 1961 c 50 § 2; 1955 c 215 § 2.]

NOTES:

Effective date -- 1991 c 81: See note following RCW [29.85.010](#).

Effective date -- Severability -- 1977 ex.s. c 361: See notes following RCW [29.01.006](#).

RCW 29.01.008

Canvassing.

"Canvassing" means the process of examining ballots or groups of ballots, subtotals, and cumulative totals in order to determine the official returns of and prepare the certification for a primary or general election and includes the tabulation of any votes for that primary or election that were not tabulated at the precinct or in a counting center on the day of the primary or election.

[1990 c 59 § 3.]

NOTES:

Intent -- Effective date -- 1990 c 59: See notes following RCW [29.01.006](#).

RCW 29.62.015

County canvassing board -- Membership, delegation of authority, public meetings.

(1) The county canvassing board consists of three members, designated in writing and filed in the office of the county auditor not later than the day before the first day duties are to be undertaken by the board, as follows:

(a) The county auditor shall designate one member, who shall be the auditor or a deputy auditor;

(b) The county prosecutor shall designate one member, who shall be the prosecutor or a deputy prosecutor; and

(c) The chair of the county legislative authority shall designate one member, who shall be a member of the county legislative authority.

(2) The members designated to the county canvassing board may not include individuals who are candidates for an office to be voted upon at the primary or election to be canvassed, unless no other individuals qualify under subsection (1) of this section.

(3) The county canvassing board may, under rules adopted by the secretary of state, delegate in writing, or at a public meeting, the performance of any task assigned by law to the board. The rules shall not authorize delegation of the responsibility of certifying the returns of a primary or election, of determining the validity of challenged ballots, or of determining the validity of special ballots referred to them by the county auditor.

(4) Meetings of the county canvassing board are public meetings under chapter [42.30](#) RCW.

[1995 c 139 § 1.]